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The teaching of values

Lecture

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The Teaching of Values

Richard Layard

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It is essential to start with the right question. I think the right question to ask is Are people happy? Ever since I first read Jeremy Bentham a few hundred yards from here I have been convinced that the best society is the one where there is the greatest happiness and (especially) the least misery. I have become even more convinced of this since modern neuroscience has shown that happiness and misery are objective phenomena and that what people say about themselves provides a lot of evidence about what they actually feel.

How are we doing on happiness?

So what do people say? It is not very encouraging. Despite huge increases in living standards, people in Britain, the USA and Japan report themselves no happier today than people did 50 years ago. Moreover, a variety of studies of depression and anxiety disorders in different countries suggest that mental illness has probably increased. In Britain we have three sets of time-series comparisons for teenagers, and they certainly suggest big rises in emotional disturbance. The largest study shows that the proportion of 16-year-olds with serious emotional problems rose in Britain from 10% in 1986 to 17% in 1999¹. A separate study based in the West of Scotland shows similar increases in emotional disturbance over that period.² And a third study covering Britain as a whole, and coming right up to 2006, shows that things have continued to worsen up to now.³

So what is going on? Let me tell you about the most careful study of patterns of happiness, by the economist John Helliwell. He has used 4 waves of the World Values Survey which has been done in 46 countries over the last twenty years. He takes as his dependent variable the average happiness in a country and then explains 80% of the variance in it by six variables, four of which I would say reflect ethical values. These four are

- the perceived trustworthiness of individuals
- the trustworthiness of government and the courts
- the community involvement of individuals, and
- the divorce rate.

Individualism and the fall in trust

I want to focus particularly on the trustworthiness of individuals. Each respondent to the survey is asked 'Do you think most other people can be trusted or would you say that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?' The proportions saying 'Yes, most people can be trusted' vary enormously and are highly correlated with the results of a Readers Digest experiment in which wallets were left in the streets of different countries and the experimenters counted the number of purses returned to their owners. Trust is very high in Scandinavian countries – over 70% of people say Yes - and this helps to explain why these countries generally come out as the happiest countries in very many surveys. Trust is much lower in Britain and among teenagers only a quarter say Yes in reply to that question.⁴

Similar findings about personal decency emerge from a recent WHO survey of 11-15 year olds who were asked ‘Are most of your classmates kind and helpful?’ Again, 70% or more said ‘Yes’ in Scandinavian countries, 53% in the US, 46% in Russia and only 43% in Britain.⁵

The sad fact is that in the US and Britain there has been an extraordinary fall in trust from 1960 – from roughly 56% trusting most other people to only 30% or so today⁶. By contrast there has been no fall in trust in any individual European country since 1981 when the data were first collected. My explanation of this is the huge growth of individualism in the US which has washed across the Atlantic like a tsunami, hitting Britain first and the rest of Europe much less, so far.

By individualism I mean the view that a person’s main goal should be to make the most of himself. Put more vulgarly it is to be as successful as possible compared with other people. That way life becomes a zero-sum game, and, if that is what people really value, there is no way our society can become happier. To become happier we have to move to a positive sum game in which we each care positively about the well-being of others. How can we do this? That is what this lecture is about.

Let me discuss first the basic ideas we need to promote. Then I’ll discuss two programmes which do this. And then I’ll move onto how we need to reform our arrangements for PHSE.

Learning the Ways to Happiness

What we need is an educational revolution in which a central purpose of our schools becomes to help young people learn the secrets of the happy life and the happy society – based upon empirical evidence. I will begin with four facts:

- 1) If you care more about other people relative to yourself, you are more likely to be happy⁷
- 2) If you constantly compare yourself with other people, you are less likely to be happy⁸
- 3) You will be happier if you choose goals that stretch you, but are attainable with high probability.⁹
- 4) You will be happier if you automatically challenge your negative thoughts, and focus on the positive aspects of your character and situation.¹⁰

These are not exactly novel ideas. They are, if you like, the Perennial Philosophy, but now rigorously established by modern psychology. The first principle is about compassion to others, the others are about compassion towards yourself. Compassion for others cannot of course be learned if it is motivated by self-interest – if it is taught that way, it will fail. It has to be realised through deliberate cultivation of the primitive instinct of empathy which is latent to a varying degree in each of us.

The principles may be obvious but they are not easy to practise. Learning hard things takes an enormous amount of practise. To play the violin well takes 10,000 hours of practise. How can we expect people to learn to be happy without massive amounts of

practise and repetition. Good parts of traditional religions (especially Buddhism) involve just such practise, but what institution have we got today which can play this basic role?

I believe it can only be done by the schools. Parents of course are crucial. But, if we want to change the culture, the main organised institutions we have under social control are the schools. So what should schools do? Though I was once a secondary school teacher, I certainly don't have a complete answer, but let me first report two suggestive experiments and then draw out some general principles.

The Penn Resiliency Programme

The first example is one of a number of programmes designed to build character and which have been subjected to random-controlled trials. This one was designed by Professor Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania, the founder of "positive psychology". It is known as the Penn Resiliency Programme. 11-year olds spend 18 classroom hours on the programme. The content of each hour is described in detail and covers such issues as understanding your own emotions and those of others, and developing concern for others.¹¹ 15 students are taught in a group by one teacher, and the teacher has to be trained in the method, which requires 8 hours of on-line self-study and 10 days of face-to-face training. The programme has now been evaluated in 11 different studies involving many different schools in three different countries. Except in one school where the training was inadequate the programme reduced the rate of teenage

depression over the next 3 years by on average one half. It also reduced bad behaviour by one third.¹²

I mention this study partly because I believe it is an object lesson in how our educational system should develop. It has always amazed me how little the scientific method is applied in the classroom, except perhaps in the teaching of reading and number. In the last 3 years I have been learning a lot about the results of psychological therapy, all of which are based on controlled trials, and I have become even more amazed at the lack of proper evaluation in education. If something as sensitive as psychological therapy can be scientifically evaluated, surely the same should apply to classroom education? For every subject we should know from controlled trials what teaching methods work best. And this applies as much to the teaching of values as to anything else.

The other lesson that emerges is the importance of the systematic and detailed training of the teachers. As has been shown with psychological therapy, the effectiveness of a given teacher will vary enormously according to how well they have been trained. We no longer need to rely on the inspired amateur.

Of course random controlled trials are one thing; delivery on a large scale is another. Having read these findings, it seemed to me worthwhile to introduce the programme on a large scale in Britain. Compared with small-scale random controlled trials, when half the children are excluded, large scale delivery to every child in a

community should have bigger effects per child – because each child taking the programme would interact with other children who had also taken it. If this applied to all children in a city, it should be possible to modify the whole youth culture of that city. I was therefore thrilled that the very imaginative local authority of South Tyneside has decided to implement the programme in all its schools, while Manchester and Hemel Hempstead are using it in a dozen further schools. The Department of Education and Science are paying for a full-scale evaluation.

If the programme is as successful as we expect, we hope it can contribute significantly to the first year curriculum for Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) in secondary schools and can be followed by further experiments for older youngsters in secondary schools.¹³

Values Schools

At primary school level, I want to mention the experiment begun in the West Kidlington Primary School near Oxford and which is now copied in a large number of other schools which call themselves values schools. The basic aim is to help children control their emotions by familiarity with uplifting ideas and role models, and the practice of silent reflection.¹⁴ The school has adopted 22 key value words, one of which is the word for the month – making a two-year cycle. Examples are Honesty or Hope or Respect. Teaching and discussion continually connects to the “word of the month”. Silent reflection is practised daily at the end of the whole-school assembly, and at the beginning of most classes. The key question children are asked is “What am I like when

I most like myself?”. Ancillary questions are “What makes me happy?” and “How can I make other people happy?” There has been no formal evaluation of the impact on the children but informal evaluation suggests improved mood, conduct and academic performance.

Four principles of reform

With these two practical examples in mind, let me move on to national policy. Let me offer four principles which should govern the role of schools in character-building.

1. It should be a **major aim** of each school to train character and provide moral education. Teachers should stand for clear values and, when asked about moral questions, they should make clear what they believe. It is not enough to treat moral issues as interesting topics for debate. It is more important to train up the emotions which support moral action than the intellectual skills involved, though both of course matter.
2. Each secondary school should have **specialists** in this area. The subject is currently known as PSHE and perhaps we have to live with such a boring title. But it would be more exciting to call it Life Skills. I will discuss the curriculum in a moment, but I want to stress that, although of course the whole school should reflect the values taught in PSHE, there must be full-time professional leadership in this area. It is no good having it taught mainly by part-timers without in-depth specialist training, though they can certainly help. This is one of the most difficult subjects to teach, and most of those who teach it should have taken it as a

specialism in their PGCE. That is what we should be aiming at. In many cases a psychology degree will prove helpful. Without a cadre of such specialist teachers acting as proselytes and high priests of the movement, there is no chance of the educational revolution we are talking about.

3. There is also no chance unless the movement is grounded in **science**. We live in a scientific age, and, although pockets of fundamentalism remain, only science can and should persuade the young about the routes to a happy society. Now for the first time we have in positive psychology a science which provides the underpinning for morality and personal liberation .
4. Fourth **the curriculum**. The list of topics is pretty obvious: managing your feelings; loving and serving others; appreciating beauty; sex, love and parenting; work and money; a critical approach to media; political participation; and moral philosophy. A lot of good work has been going on in this area. The DFES has been active in curriculum development and the SEAL Programme (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) is based on the right ideas and well-developed, with excellent materials at the primary school level.¹⁵ But what I am proposing is something more campaigning and more high profile. We need a government commitment to producing a major PGCE specialism in this area. Moreover, the subject of PSHE should continue up to age 18, and include projects which are graded by the school. Performances in PSHE should figure in the head teachers' report for every university applicant.

Do we need it?

Clearly I am talking about a movement of moral reform. Do we need it, and can it succeed?

Let me remind you where we started from. I think we have a pretty good society compared with most that have existed. We are as happy as we were 50 years ago, but in terms of happiness we have made no progress over that period. We have made enormous progress in the mastery of nature but none in the mastery of ourselves. If we want to make further progress in well-being, it has to come mainly from better mastery of ourselves. If we think we cannot afford the time for that because of the threat of global competition, we had better take a Part I course in economics.

On top of that general case, there is the specific worry these days about young people. There is the worry about their behaviour, which has led to the Prime Minister's Respect programme, which is so far more repressive than preventive – what I am suggesting would contribute significantly to prevention. And there is the serious scientific evidence that young people are becoming more disturbed.

Can we succeed?

So what are our chances of success? Some people would say they are poor. Some programmes in schools focussed on particular problems like drugs have had little

success, but there is some evidence that wider programmes based on the whole ethos of the school are more effective.¹⁶ In any case I am talking about something bigger than a programme. I am talking about a reversal of a major cultural trend. Currently we are seeing increased consumerism, increased inter-personal competition, and increased interest in celebrity and money. We used to know little of the Dow Jones index – now we hear it whenever we hear the news.

Many people assume that cultural trends go on in the same direction for ever. That is not my reading of history. Looking at English history, I see something more like cycles. Increased Puritanism in the sixteenth century; then from around 1660 Puritanism giving way to increased licence. Then from around 1830 increased Puritanism again and the growth of Victorian values. Then in the twentieth century again increased license. So why not in the twenty-first century some shift away from “anything goes” – a shift towards a more compassionate society?

But how plausible is the education system as the main catalyst of change? Well, it has been so in the past. This university played a major role in the Puritan revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries, and Thomas Arnold of Rugby did more than anyone to convert the middle classes to Victorian values. Today more people spend more of their life in the education system than ever before; so it is the natural catalyst of change. 60% of 16-19-year-olds, when asked about their main ambition, say it is to be happy. It’s the most commonly given ambition and very sensible too. Let’s help them to achieve it.¹⁷

I have no doubt that new institutions will also develop for adults. In California the psychologist Paul Ekman has suggested chains of “compassion gyms” where you train your mind in compassion, just as you train your body in the physical gym. I also hope that the churches will do more to help people train their minds in the mental disciplines which we know can lead to serenity and compassion.

But from a public policy perspective we have to start with the schools. This is a good moment. People are worried about young people from many angles. We have good tools with which to help them. In case you forgot, the key need which I’ve identified is to create a profession of PSHE teachers. They should give evidence-based teaching that changes lives, and that goes on to 18. So let’s get started.

Endnotes

¹ Based on 3 questions answered by parents about their 15-16 year old children in the BCS 70 and the BCAMH Survey (also the NCDS) – see S. Collishaw et al, ‘Time trends in adolescent mental health’, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 45:8 [2004], pp.1350-1362.

² The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) was administered to 15-year-olds in 1987 and 1999 – see P. West & H. Sweeting, ‘Fifteen, female and stressed: changing patterns of psychological distress over time’ *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*.

³ Private communication from Stephan Collishaw. The study was based on self-reports of 15-16 year olds in the BCS 70 and a new survey of 800 teenagers.

⁴ A. Park et al, *Young People in Britain. The Attitudes and Experiences of 12-19 Year Olds. DFES Research Report RR564* (2004)

⁵ Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries, *Unicef*, p. 44.

⁶ See R. Layard, *Happiness – Lessons from a New Science* Penguin, (2005)

⁷ S. Lyubomirsky, L. King and E. Diener, “Happiness as a strength: a theory of the benefits of positive affect”, University of California, Riverside, mimeo (2003).

⁸ B. Schwartz, A. Lyubomirsky, S. Monterosso, J. White, and D. Lehman, “Maximizing versus satisficing: Happiness is a matter of choice,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83, 1178-97 (2002)

⁹ R. Nesse, “The evolution of hope and despair.” *Social Research* 66 (2000)

¹⁰ M. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, 2002

¹¹ See for example M. Seligman, *The Optimistic Child*

¹² K. Reivich, J. Gillham, A. Shatte’, M. Seligman, *A Resilience Initiative and Depression prevention Program for Youth and their Parents*, Penn Resiliency Project, (2005).

¹³ The PATHS Programme has been widely used in Scotland.

¹⁴ Frances Farrer *A Quiet Revolution. Encouraging and sharing positive values with children.* (2000)

¹⁵ On emotional education in schools, see *Healthy Minds*, Ofsted 2005.

¹⁶ C. Bonnell, A. Fletcher and J. McCambridge “Improving schools ethos may reduce substance misuse and teenage pregnancy” *British Medical Journal* Volume 334, 614-617 (2007). See also K. Weare and G. Gray “What Works in Developing Children’s Emotional and Social Competence and Wellbeing?” Department for Education and Skills Research Report 456, July 2003.

¹⁷ A. Park, *op cit.*